

Bonnie Mak. *How the Page Matters*.

Studies in Book and Print Culture Series. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. xii + 132 pp. \$55. ISBN: 978-0-8020-9760-6.

In this study, Bonnie Mak aims to challenge “present-day assumptions about the page and its operation” by exploring “the significance of the page in the development of Western civilization and consider[ing] why the interface continues to play such an important role in the transmission of thought” (3). Mak pursues this project by investigating the material manifestations of Buonaccorso de Montemagno’s fifteenth-century *Controversia de nobilitate* in manuscript, print, and digital forms. By focusing on the persistence of the page as interface, Mak seeks to complicate conventional histories of the book and media that “have been circumscribed variously by formal, national, and temporal divides” (5). Although Mak argues that she “proposes an alternative history that is organized around the page” (7), her approach shares much with the materialist studies of many other scholars, like Nichols, Dagenais, Storey, Stallybrass, Masten, McKenzie, and McGann, who have placed an analysis of the materiality of the page (whether handwritten or printed) very much at the center of their research. Even if it is not novel, Mak’s strategy of analyzing the changing configurations of the page through the lens of a single work is nonetheless a good one that could complicate the history of the book, augment our understanding of this particular work’s transmission, and perhaps even challenge current interpretations of it.

In the first chapter, Mak provides a brief history of the page from papyrus rolls to the digital page in terms that largely echo those traditional histories that she intends to critique. Moreover, even as she traces the different configurations of the page over time, she takes the idea of the page as a given, without discussing the different conceptual valences of medieval and early modern (not to mention modern) terminology, like *pagina*, *carta*, *folio*, and *webpage*, each of which suggests how the page can matter in different ways. At the end of this chapter, Mak returns to Buonaccorso’s treatise, noting that while Buonaccorso’s text “has remained remarkably consistent” in its transmission, the work has undergone “dramatic changes . . . in the design of its pages,” which have variously presented the work as “a rhetorical exercise, a courtly romance, a scholarly tract, or a precious relic” (20), with the rhetorical reading typical of the Italian reception and the courtly understanding of the French.

Chapters 2 and 3 are largely descriptive surveys of the paleographic and paratextual presentation of Latin, Italian, and French versions, but chapter 4 leaves the idea of the page behind to discuss where different copies of the work are located in the modern Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF). This chapter is the most successful of the book because it develops organically from Buonaccorso’s work, where in the contest for the hand of Lucretia, Flaminius uses his library as evidence of the nobility of his achievements in contrast to Cornelius’s mere nobility of blood. The ensuing discussion of the significance of the idea of the library in the fifteenth century provides an interesting social-historical context in which to understand

Flaminius's argument and prepares the conceptual terrain for the analysis of the BNF itself that follows. Although it discusses the placement of Buonaccorso's pages instead of their material matter, this chapter convincingly integrates a reading of Buonaccorso's work and its critical reception with larger issues of book classification and cultural history in ways that enrich the descriptive surveys of chapters 2 and 3. The final chapter on two digital versions of Buonaccorso's work returns to the topic of the page and contains a brief but thought-provoking discussion of digital mediation that addresses analogies between editorial strategies adopted in early print and those to be found in contemporary digital archives and repositories. This chapter provides a useful perspective on these issues for scholars analyzing digital versions of texts and will probably appeal to the broadest readership, as scholars increasingly explore how historical materials fit into the digital future.

The tension between Mak's ambitious argument about the page, quoted in the first line of this review, and the actual evidence that she finds in Buonaccorso's treatise likely leads to the confusing organization of this relatively brief book (whose main text covers only 73 pages). These conflicting concerns leave the study feeling somewhat incomplete. While this study might have contributed to the history of book technology, it neither develops a complex concept of the page nor explains what our "present-day assumptions" about it are; while it might have revealed more about the history of the work's transmission, it reinforces or reaffirms what other scholars have already established about the work's *fortuna* instead of delving further into the social history of individual instances to reassess those received ideas; while it might have challenged interpretations of Buonaccorso's work itself, those contents are treated only in passing. The achievements of chapter 4 on the library suggest a different path this book might have taken as a cultural history of Buonaccorso's work, which would likely have rewarded its readers with significant insights, but the decision to emphasize the idea of the page dilutes the force of these interesting claims in the book as a whole.

MARTIN G. EISNER
Duke University